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## PLEASURE AS ETHICAL STANDARD.

IN the experience of every teacher of ethics there undoubtedly are moments when the contention of the utilitarian appears irresistible—that pleasure is the test; that pleasure may be a statement of the end. If perchance this finding is not true for teachers, it is at least true for students of ethics, and teachers are accustomed to pass it over lightly, to attribute it to the brilliancy of Mill's style or to the immaturity of the student mind. But is it not a psychological fact which should be carefully explained? There seems to be a time in our thinking when all the trenchant criticisms of the opposition appear to be woefully wide of the mark, and not to have met the contentions of the master at all. One cannot desire pleasure, we are told, for he must always desire an object. Quite true, we reply, but is not the object the medium of his pleasure? And it seems possible in this way to measure the most heroic devotion. Christ on the cross may have looked far into the future, beyond his own hours of anguish, beyond that period of woes which we call the early church, beyond the misrepresentations of the dark ages, and have seen his truth fructifying the hearts of men and making earth a heavenly place, through the sense of unity with God which he came to impart. He may have counted all the aggregated woes which came between as nothing in comparison with the pleasure which that truth would at length bring. So that even the sword which he left may have seemed to become a beacon of joy. And Socrates, when he held that memorable discussion with the personified Laws of Athens, and then girded himself to go to death, may have discounted the disintegration of his well-beloved city and his own martyrdom, to prefer the thrills of joy which his truth, sealed with his blood, would at length bring. Thus it seems to be possible to find a pleasure tone for every conscious act—a pleasure which will outweigh the loss entailed, a pleasure which I, the doer, may myself make mine, as well as thine, for whom the act is done. And the case

seems stronger when we remember that the psychologists are teaching us that every conscious act combines the three cardinal aspects of consciousness: that feeling, and willing, and thinking are inextricably woven to form its texture. Will not the good report itself in feeling? and can it report itself in any other way? It is thus that the case appears to the student; and one must admit that there is truth, some truth, in his contention.

The question is concerning the criterion of conscious action. Is there anywhere assurance for the man who would act rightly, a standard by which he can measure and test his efforts, as the judge tests the law by precedent, and the theologian his truth by authority. Plainly there must be such a standard; for ethical thought—the evaluation of conduct—must have used it; there must be somewhere a common coin of the realm which shall measure. But the newcomer into the field of ethics is like a stranger in a strange land, unable to understand the language, and not in possession of the money of the country. In the midst of this confusion, a simple solution is gracefully presented to him. He welcomes it gladly, and is bound to it until the exigencies of trade put him in possession of other and better standards; but that which bridged the crisis of his youth is ever dear to him. Such a standard as this one receives from the utilitarians—easy, appealing, useful, noble; but is it satisfactory, and why not?

Mill has defined the ultimate end for utilitarianism as “an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; . . . this being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action is necessarily also the standard.” The first great difficulty that arises, in dealing with the system, is to understand and measure these qualities of pleasure. Most writers agree that experiences have a common tone of pleasantness, in which they differ by a more-or-less, and, when regarded with respect to this alone, they can be measured and compared numerically. Does this exhaust their “feels”? When two possible experiences are offered whose promised pleasantnesses are equal, how shall choice be made? Ethical writers are in the habit of saying that

the one is chosen because of its quality ; because it is regarded as of more value than the other, for some other reason than its pleasantness. And may it not be replied that it is possible to state this added value in terms of feeling also ? I choose the one because I am in the habit of acting in that way and not in the other, that is, a greater feeling of ease attends this action. I prefer an intellectual to a gustatory pleasure which seems to promise as much, because there is a fitness—or slightly more pleasure—in it. Of prospective actions which I can equally well perform, the thought of the farther-reaching character of the one, of the more joys it will create, makes it more pleasant for me, and I will it.

It seems possible in this way to reduce all preferability to degrees of pleasantness. It is logically possible to do so, although it is difficult. Might not one even say that that view which claims to regard conduct as good, not because it leads to any further result as pleasure, nor because it is fated by some inexplicable idea of good, but in virtue of the equilibrium it establishes inside the parts of experience—may not one say that even this condition is best, since it is most pleasant, and, when reflected upon, means the very maximum of pleasure for the society about me ? We are told that the act of the Good Samaritan is good, not because he brought pleasure to him who had fallen among thieves, but because it evidenced a good character ; but may not a good character be interpreted in terms of conduct, and this again in terms of pleasure ? Is there any moral good which does not become pleasure, someone's pleasure, in some far-distant clime and time, perhaps, but still someone's pleasure, which I, the actor, can prefigure in my imagination, and so make mine ?

The dream of mathematics is appealing. Cannot one imagine the whole moral judgment that the drunkard's state is lower than the philosopher's expressed in this way ? Tam trades the pains of days of sobering—the painfully wrecked hopes of his home, their fears of his stick, the pains which he will transmit to structurally weak children, the jeopardy of society—all these Tam trades for a few moments of wild delight. Surely we may

follow the lead of the temperance reformer, and say his act is bad because he makes such a bad bargain. On the other hand, one can appreciate the work of the philosopher in the same way. He delights to make pleasure for all after-time, and in so doing finds his own greatest pleasure; and the statement that the regarding of the greatest sum of pleasure as the test of conduct would be like declaring that, when you had an atomic weight of 98, you had sulphuric acid, is not a fair criticism; for the problem here is not to find a definite quality, but the largest effect of given forces. It is even the dream of chemistry to state its qualities in terms of motion, and the problem here is a much easier problem—a problem in manufacture, the shaping of my energy in such a way that it will bring the most pleasure to the most men. Psychology has not given up the hope of stating the difference between red and blue, if not in terms of ether-waves, in number of cells and amount of retinal energy released or of brain-change produced. Differences in the taste of several wines may ultimately be stated in the same fashion, while the warmth of the red tone, and the sadness of the black, may be stated in the amount of nervous release they effect within us, or the differing impacts they transfer to our organs.

The same discussion of value which goes on in political economy may be stated thus also. One school maintains that value is determined by effort; the other, that value is measured by effects. But if one could measure the struggle which society has made through countless years to shape the hand, would he not have an accurate test for all its work? Or, on the other hand, if one could consider all the effects radiating therefrom, both to the worker and to society, would not the measure be complete? Is there not between action and reaction, between effort and effect, between cause and consequent, a constant equation? and may the process not be stated equally well from either side? If the world is homogeneous at core, its differences can at length be stated quantitatively; but they will just equal the complete list of qualities which we endeavor to state now. The attempt of the utilitarian to state the world of human acts from the side of reaction is not inherently impossible. If all

conscious experience is felt experience, is either pleasant or painful, why may he not state all experience from the side of pleasure or pain? Mill declares that he can. The competent, those who can recognize the subtle variations of pleasantness, shall do so. And this is the weakness of the doctrine. One does not tell a carpenter to so pursue his trade as to effect the greatest amount of pleasantness for the world, and so for himself. One is not taught in logic to so manipulate propositions as to bring the maximum of pleasure to men through his researches. Even the musician is not instructed to play so as to please, nor the judge to measure out the law upon the basis of the greatest pleasure he can effect through his decision. Later in his life we find Mill writing: "I never indeed wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct and the end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed upon some object other than their own happiness: on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some act or pursuit followed, not as a means, but as itself an ideal; and aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way the enjoyments of life (such was my theory) are sufficient to make it a pleasant thing, when they are taken *en passant*, without being made a principal object. Once make them so, and they are immediately felt to be insufficient. They will not bear a scrutinizing examination. Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some end external to it as the purpose of life." Happiness is to be had, but happiness cannot be the standard, and so cannot be the end. So with the carpenter: he must so pursue his trade as to bring the maximum of happiness to men, and if he cannot point to benefits of this kind, he is socially condemned. He may not serve his generation; he may spend his efforts in inventing tools and making designs which will not be used for generations; but somewhere a pleasure lurks upon all good work. So with the logician: surely, it is a pleasure for him to see things in their relations, and to set the world right. So with the musician; so

with the judge. No act of man is pure: all acts are tarnished in the common clay of human joy. None but a mad man could act without getting pleasure or pain from his act. It is a universal quality which attends all action. But it is not the ethical standard, and cannot be the ethical standard, unless the whole of experience appears within it. Nothing can test consciousness but consciousness itself; consciousness organized, consciousness functioning. Pleasure is one of the elements of reality, but not that full reality which experience offers. It is vain to attempt to measure the whole by one of its parts, unless the whole functions through the part and this functioning is constant. Pleasure is *a* standard of action, but it will not work. To tell the carpenter to get the most pleasure for humanity is to give him an impossible rule; for it involves endless calculations for the making of which neither minds nor tools have as yet been perfected. At a time when physics, dealing with a comparatively simple subject-matter by means of innumerable tools and laboratory inventions, has barely succeeded in reducing its phenomena to mathematical expression; when chemistry, with all its delicacy of tests and tools, has just begun to enter its facts in such formulæ, is it not something akin to sheer folly to offer to men mathematical criteria for all the world of human relations, and expect them to use them? For facts the most complex, for a field the least explored, without methods and without tools, the delicate shadings of more-or-less in pleasure become impossible and useless guides. Undoubtedly they are there, and if we could discover their variations, they might serve us as the measure of all our experience; for in any group of three constants any one of them may measure the variations of the whole group. When the law of pleasure's constancy in the group-experience shall have been discovered, then will pleasure be *a* standard; but not *the* standard of action, for this discovery will involve the discovery of the constancy of the other aspects of the group, each of which will then adequately state the whole. To set up pleasure as the standard before that time is analogous to the action of a physician who, believing the mind and body are functions, each of the other, should immediately conclude

that the body is the standard for all changes of the whole organism, and refuse to diagnose insanity without discovering a bodily lesion.

The old contention that pleasures could not be summed has been found to be an illusion. Hegel taught us, long since, that the whole world could be viewed under any one of the categories. All measuring is measuring of the contents of mental states. Whoever contends that the universe is one is contending that it can be measured. Only the thoroughgoing pluralist objects to such a procedure, and remains in an unrelated world. Here their own method condemns the utilitarian thinking; for with them the total one is rather an accident than a thoroughgoing identity. A measurable universe must be tightly ribbed together by a common nature, else it is not measurable. The logical necessity of their position forces this admission from them, but always half-heartedly. It is not necessary here to meet the overpowering question of the relation of quality to quantity. It can only be met imaginatively, as yet. But it is permitted one to have a strong faith that everything which appears in space or in time can be reduced at length to the quantitative form. "Quantity without an essential qualitative side, and a qualitative object with no quantity, are not conceivable." To say that we are unable to measure does not prove the impossibility of measuring. Measure is a principle which seems to belong everywhere.

But to remove this objection we must go deeper. It is sometimes declared that pleasures cannot even be desired: that they cannot appear in the projected image; for their only being is a present being. But they can be foredetermined in just the same way in which objective "goods" are—in thought. Quite true, the pleasure which is thought of is not the pleasure of attainment. Neither is the good which is thought of the good which is at length attained. Both are anticipations, and there is inherently no reason why one state of mind should not be prefigured as well as another. No matter what the difficulties of introspection, one can at least prospect the will and the feeling as well as the thought. States of mind can be used to symbolize the one as



well as the other. The utilitarians have never contended for anything but pleasure as the predeterminant in the judgment which precedes action. One can certainly trade the prospective pains of a toothache for the briefer, if no less intense, pains of the dentist's chair; and the contention is that the process is general. The instance here given seems to be a summing of pains. May not the summing of pleasures be undertaken in the same way? Mr. Rashdall has pointed out very conclusively that the objection that a sum of pleasures is not capable of existing altogether at a given moment of time is an objection equally valid against the desire for one single pleasure; for it occurs in time, and is itself a sum of timed units. Every pleasure is thus a sum of pleasures. In the prospective judgment the pleasure in the field of view may be of long duration, as the thought of a summer abroad or a college education, now possible for one who has hitherto desired it against hope. Pleasures are here summed through the time series; or my pleasure may at one instant call into action my entire organism. Coming thus without rivals, it will be most intense. In this way a sum of pleasures will be a sum of coördinate functionings which can be measured at length, perhaps, by cellular conditions. It is imaginatively possible to sum all pleasures either in the spatial or in the temporal series. And the so-called qualities of pleasure, or even qualities of conduct, which are not commonly supposed to have this cumulative aspect, appear to be no exceptions to the rule. The joy of the martyr may have an intensity which can be summed against the pains of the consuming fire. A good character may bring the thought of joy extending through an infinite series of time moments to its possessor. The accumulated thrills of a nation, extending both in space and time, may appear in the warrior as a veritable passion for death.

But even granting that all actions have pleasure tones, and that these pleasure tones vary in quantitatively determinable ways, Green's contention is still true that the greatest-possible-happiness doctrine offers no possibility of determining within what limits the quantity of happiness is to be taken. The test seems at one time to be the happiness of society; but the question then

is, what society? In what place or time? And the greatest sum appears as a constantly receding quantity whose limits are nowhere determinable, being capable of infinite expansion. But in this dilemma one seems to be referred back to the self. What is wanted is the greatest possible happiness for me. But in determining by utility, one is recognizing his pleasure as varying with the pleasure of others; and here he is called upon to measure an indeterminable reaction. The greatest possible happiness for me alone was the old standard which Mill sought to overthrow.

Not only are we invited to sum an infinite series without limits, but the question of reducing pleasures to a unit scale confronts us. For one trained in the atomistic English classical psychology this question seemed to possess no difficulties. And yet no one of the great masters of the school succeeded in laying firm hold on the unit. If pleasures can be summed, they must be arranged upon a common scale in such a way that their differences shall appear, else the phrase remains a mere figure of speech. A crude more-or-less, an indeterminable higher-or-lower, are not sufficient symbols for a calculus. The question is: Can they be scaled? Grant that there is a quantitative aspect both to quality and to intensity, is this quantitative aspect manageable? And this is the failure of Hedonism as a scientific theory. Its easy more-and-less are common-sense determinations which guide men only in simple cases. For complex and intricate problems (and consciousness is called forth to do battle only with stubborn facts) the rule offers no deliverance. True, it is far easier to say that one flock of sheep is bigger than another than by how many it is bigger, but it is only in cases of doubt that the necessity arises for making the statements; then recourse must be had to counting. The chief duty of a camp-follower in the army of scientific discoverers is to have allegiance to the flag, faith in the front rank, and to follow. In the present instance this means that one must believe in the power of the psychologist to scale pleasures and pains in such a way as at length will offer as satisfactory registrations of consciousness as can be had from any other aspect. But this end is not yet.

At the present time there are grave doubts as to the constant character of feeling. The fundamental postulate as to the unseparably threefold character of consciousness, even, is still sometimes called in question. It is quite generally assumed that our knowledge of pleasure and pain and their value is much greater than it really is. If it be said that too much of any form of stimulus brings pain, it is not yet certain that there is a too-much of every form of stimulus. Again, is pain always present to indicate damage? Certainly not in the case of changes of personality, or in all forms of mental degeneration. Mere loss, contraction of powers, does not seem to bring it. Again, is pleasure a safe indicator of well-being? In the case of poisons that taste agreeably and yet destroy, it is not. And if pleasure be defined as dependent upon expansion, is not every retreat from prospective pain an expansion? And here pleasure and pain would seem to be conflicting equalities. The psychologist must confront such problems, and many more besides, until he is ready to confess that he does not even know what pleasure is, or pain. And with his inability to draw the line between, he is quite frank. Until his work be more completely done, ethical science must wait for such propædæutic, and must rely upon discoveries already made.

But this is not to say that one must possess his soul in patience until this seemingly indeterminable siege, with such approachless facts, is done. Fortunately, we are not compelled to say, with Socrates, that the best worship is to conform to the religious observances of the land. Ethics is a science, but not by means of the unworkable reference to feeling. One is not compelled to wait until those vast complexities are unraveled. Already he finds a test, if still a crude one, ready at hand.

The judge does not refuse to try the case because he cannot determine the most useful decision in terms of pleasure. The carpenter is not paralyzed by his inability to measure the preponderance of social joy. Nor is the logician at a loss for certainty without it. Even the utilitarian has not been hindered by utter inability to apply his own dictum. There are, then, tests by which the value of action is determined, and by these the

process of morality is carried forward. What are they? The very tests which the judge, and the carpenter, and the logician have been using. These, and none other, are the tests in the realm of the moral judgment. It is to close one's inquiry too soon to say that the judge determines the law by precedent. The process would hardly be worth the active form, if it were so simple. The mechanic is one who constructs, not simply imitates; and the scientist, in his laboratory, is not content with what he merely sees. Let the judge be typical of the process. There is almost endless disagreement among authorities. There is a new element in every case. This is so strikingly true that the work of the old doctors of the law who spent their time in deciding every imaginable possible case before it arose in actual society, in order that trial judges might thereby have exhaustive guides for the treatment of every possible case at hand, soon found their services of little use, and forsook their scholastic calling; for they seemed to themselves to be no match whatever for the world-consciousness in power to mix the details of men's altercations. Confused by conflicting precedents, confounded by situations which have never before been adjudged, the court is compelled to make a law for almost every case. What is his guide? The matter is a serious one; it must be rightly dealt with. His sole reliance is upon consistency. The breach between authorities must be healed. Unity must come out of their conflict. His judgment must note them and order them. His opinion is made up when he succeeds in harmonizing all the elements involved. They check and balance each other until his judgment reduces them to a harmonious whole. Neither utility nor past effort, though they are one, fixed the value alone. Past efforts, experience, counts for much, possibly most, in his decision; but it must be expanded to meet the peculiar demands of the new situation. It is impossible for him to determine by his feeling, or the feelings of others for that itself is indeterminable; it is impossible for him to determine by abstract reasoning, for that is not his; and it is impossible for him to determine by abstract will alone, for that is not to determine. But he, the unity of them all, must

function completely in making the determination, and he functions most completely in their adjustment. Until the psychologist shall have taught him to make this adjustment through any one of its aspects, neither abstract pleasure, nor abstract reason, nor abstract will can act as standard; for until their constancy is calculated, no one of these can represent the group, and when their constancy is calculated, they cannot do more than this. Until that time they must continue to act as checks and balances each upon the other; after that time they will be accepted tests only when they stand proxy for the harmony of the whole. Equilibrium, self-consistency, harmony, peace, is the ethical test.

But Mill has raised another question—why one cannot aim at pleasure and get it. Two reasons may be given: First, that the attending to the expected pleasure rather than to the actions appropriate to produce it, is a withdrawal of mental efficiency from the effort to the result, and a consequent lowering of the effort, which at length disappoints by producing a correspondingly lowered result. Second, there is an element of surprise or contrast which seems to heighten a pleasure, which is here taken away; and the effect of the anticipation would seem to amount to an extending of the pleasure over a larger time period, with a corresponding decrease of intensity. If one cannot, by choosing, get pleasure, it is at least a question whether pleasure is an adequate expression of his activity, and although it is an inseparable factor in his expression, it cannot be used as the normative factor. The question is not whether quantity of pleasure is a test; it is as to our ability to determine by it.

ERNEST CARROLL MOORE.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA.